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Linda B. Alexander
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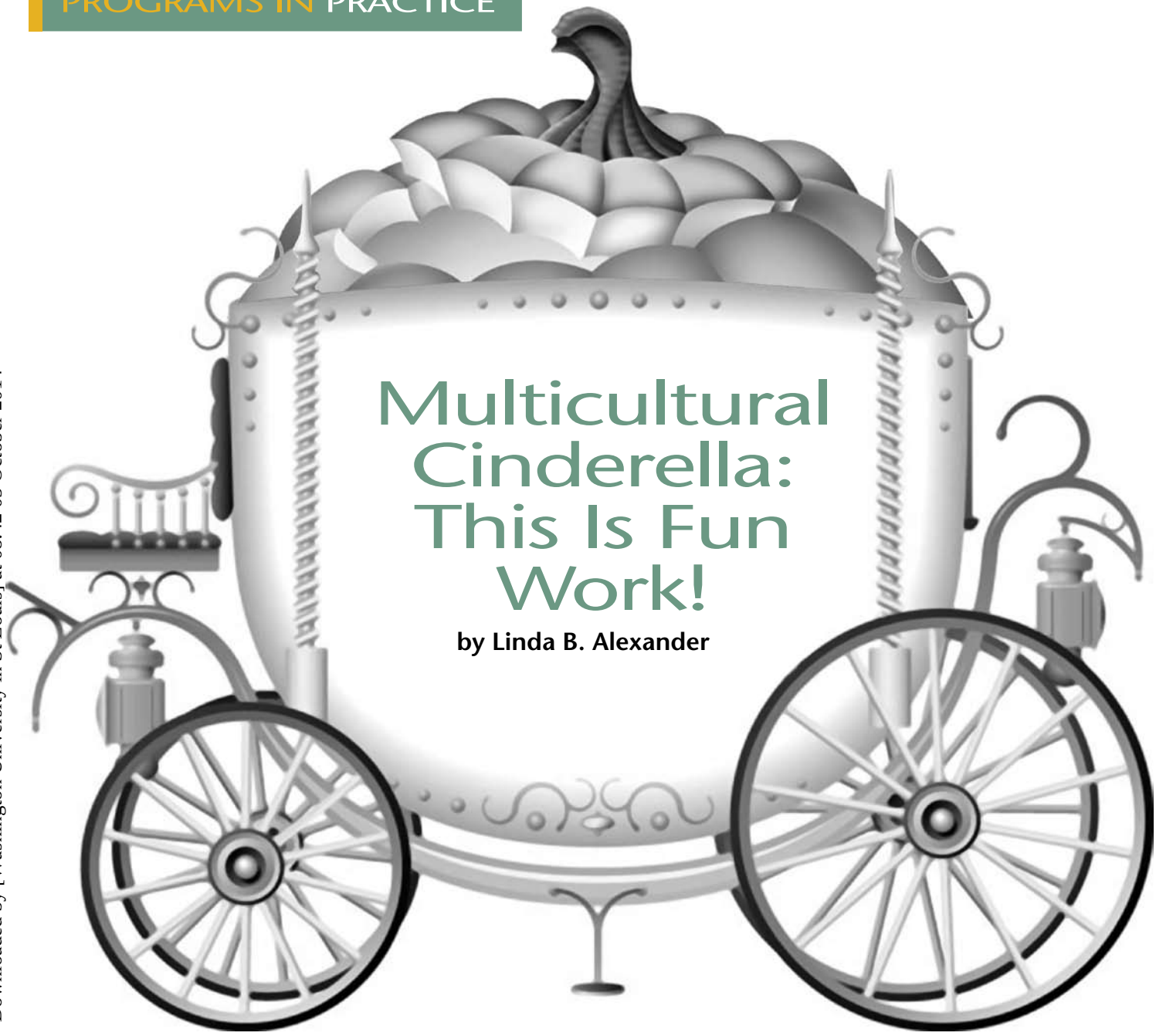

Multicultural Cinderella: This Is Fun Work!

by Linda B. Alexander

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Schools in the United States are seeing a tremendous increase in the cultural and ethnic diversity of the children they serve. Demographic projections have estimated that by 2020, nearly half of U.S. students will be people of color (National Association of State Boards of Education 2002). This reality, along with expanding relationships among countries around the world, increases the need for children to view themselves as members of a multicultural, global community.

Because quality literature reaches the minds and hearts of its readers, reading and discussing multicultural literature broadens children's perspectives and increases their understanding in a way that affects how people live in a pluralistic society (Pallas, Natriello, and McDill 1989). All schools should be providing opportunities for students to read and discuss material from multiple viewpoints to develop attitudes of open-mindedness about diversity, which

Linda B. Alexander *has masters degrees in library science and education and an Ed.D. in Educational Administration. She teaches online graduate courses in the School of Library and Information Science at the University of South Florida in Tampa. She is a member of the Eta Chi Chapter of Kappa Delta Pi.*

is what the Multicultural Cinderella Project sought to accomplish.

About the School

Florida, in particular, is already a diverse society. At Egypt Lake Elementary School in Tampa—the site for the Multicultural Cinderella Project—students hail from 18 countries, and 61 percent of the students are of Hispanic origin. Approximately 20 percent are white (European American), 12 percent are African American, with smaller percentages of multiracial descent (5 percent) and Asian (2 percent). Thirty-two percent of the students are enrolled in limited English proficiency classes (ESOL) to improve their language fluency.

About the Project

Demographics like those of Egypt Lake Elementary demand that the school use multiple viewpoints to best serve its students. This issue is of great concern to the teachers, who strive to develop cultural sensitivity and awareness of diversity in their students. Moreover, the school aims to integrate multiculturalism into the curriculum. To reach this goal, teachers needed multicultural materials to engage students in a vigorous program to improve reading levels, address the issue of multiple viewpoints, and get children excited about literature.

To meet this challenge, Linda Alexander (author of this article) of the School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) and colleagues at the University of South Florida (USF) teamed up. Joining them were the reading resource teachers and other teachers at Egypt Lake Elementary School and the Egypt Lake Partnership Public Library. Together, they provided a program called "Tampa Bay Community Multicultural Outreach: Exploring Diversity through Cinderella Stories." This project, funded by an internal USF grant, allowed the USF faculty team to purchase multiple copies of the many versions of the Cinderella folktale for reading resource teachers.

At the beginning of the 2003–2004 school year, reading resource teachers made an appeal for all interested students, including those of limited English proficiency, to join a reading enrichment program. The students who volunteered were divided into primary and intermediate groups, which became known as the Exploration classes.

For the Multicultural Cinderella Project, the two reading resource teachers at Egypt Lake introduced various versions of Cinderella to students in the Exploration classes. Cinderella stories, from the folktale genre, are found in more than 500 cultures around the world (Kaminiski 2000). While many versions date from ancient times, others are more recent. These stories fit the need because, as Huck et al. (2001, 301) suggested, "good fantasy might be critical to children's understanding of themselves and the struggles they will face as human beings."

The students attended Exploration classes on a volunteer basis twice per month during the school year, beginning in November. A USF-SLIS graduate student collaborated, along with the school media specialist and the community partnership staff librarian, in teaching two groups of Exploration students (one Kindergarten–2nd grade and one 3rd–5th grade) at Egypt Lake.

Activities

Preparing for the project required focused planning. At the beginning of the school year, 34 versions of the Cinderella story were ordered. Among these were:

- Tomie DePaola's *Adelita: A Mexican Cinderella Story* (Putnam 2002);
- Robert D. San Souci's *Cendrillon: A Caribbean Cinderella* (Simon and Schuster 1998);
- Shirley Climo's *The Egyptian Cinderella* (Crowell 1989), *The Irish Cinderlad* (HarperCollins 1996), and *The Persian Cinderella* (HarperCollins 1999);
- Babette Cole's *Prince Cinders* (Putnam 1987);
- Rafe Martin's *The Rough-Face Girl* (Putnam 1992); and
- Nina Jaffe's *The Way Meat Loves Salt: A Cinderella Tale from the Jewish Tradition* (Holt 1998).

With guided group reading, the students compared and contrasted the cultural differences and similarities of each version by reading and viewing the illustrations and exploring new words introduced in other languages. These higher-level comprehension skills also help students in reading other content. Another activity involved students talking about their own cultural backgrounds and where they had originated. As homework, students located more information about cultural heritage for the class to discuss.

Among other components of the project, students created passports on which they recorded information about each country they had "visited" and the title of the related Cinderella book. They also studied maps from each country, made a Chinese quilt out of paper, drew life-sized pictures of the characters, and tasted food that represented various countries.

Two plays, including puppet shows, culminated the project. With help from the teachers, students wrote the scripts for both plays. Students then performed the plays for the school, parents, and community. The younger children used their handmade puppets to perform a puppet show, while the older students acted out the character roles.

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This Is **Fun Work!**

At the end of the project, participants—teachers, librarians, and students—were interviewed in focus groups to assess the affective impact of the program. When asked what they had learned, students responded that they learned about different cultures, wearing different clothing, and different ways people love each other, among other responses. When asked what they wanted to do next, some students answered "read *The Three Little Pigs,*" "read *Snow White,*" "study history," and "study another language and how to speak it." All wanted to continue in the program and to meet more often than every other week. They suggested making more costumes and including more people the next time. When asked what they liked best, some submitted "being narrator," "learning different cultures," and "you learn and have fun at the same time."

During the interviews, teachers emphasized that the students felt appreciated and that some who had been shy had really "come out" in their roles in the plays. They believed that the success of the first play gave students newfound confidence to perform even better in the second play. The plays gave the students an opportunity to "shine." One student, who was not a good reader, worked very hard to be a narrator. One formerly rebellious student chose to be more cooperative so that he could be part of the performance. Some artistic talent emerged that had not been noticed previously. Teachers said that the students picked up more on the cultures than expected, such as noting the landscapes of the countries. For instance, students noticed Ireland's rolling hills, very green grass, and the way people dressed.

Students who previously had hidden where they were from became more interested in their own backgrounds. When students were assigned to talk about their heritage with parents, communication at home was enhanced. Two-thirds of the students felt they that were better readers after the project. One boy evened tutored another in how to read Spanish.

Teachers identified a few important outcomes of this project. Self-esteem seemed to be greatly enhanced in the students. Formerly shy students became stars in the play, and this translated into more confidence and cooperation in the Exploration class. After the project, teachers noted their concern that the boys would resist reading about Cinderella. They were pleasantly relieved when, after reading the first book, *Irish Cinderlad*, "Those boys were really into it!"

"Students who previously had hidden where they were from became more interested in their own backgrounds."

From **School to Community**

Collaborators hoped that integrating multicultural materials into the reading exploration program at Egypt Lake would contribute to increasing open-mindedness and understanding of diversity in a pluralistic society. The venture between USF, Egypt Lake Elementary School, and the Egypt Lake Partnership Public Library allowed the partner school to develop a collection of multicultural folktales. These same materials can be used with future Exploration classes on a yearly basis. Through this cooperative project, faculty at USF provided meaningful learning experiences for library science graduate students as well as for the teachers they trained to use the materials. Ultimately, the community benefited from this collective effort via student performances, projects displayed in the partnership library, and stimulation of parental involvement.

This program can be adapted to middle and high school levels; to other traditional folktales or fantasy tales; to celebrations such as Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, and National Jewish Book Month; and to any locale across the country. The school's media specialist, who is trained to locate materials, can help classroom teachers locate valuable materials for integrating diversity and multiple perspectives into the general curriculum. A host of ideas for classroom extension activities and programs, and bibliographies of quality K–12 ethnic literature can be found by visiting the author's USF Web page for *Multicultural Materials for Children and Young Adults* at *www.cas.usf.edu/~lalexand/multicultural.htm.*

All in all, the goal to improve awareness and respect for cultural sensitivity in students was met successfully by this project. As one of the students in the Exploration classes so aptly stated, "This is fun work!"

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